U.S. House Speaker [*Mike Johnson*](https://apnews.com/hub/mike-johnson/) assailed the [*hush money case against Donald Trump*](https://apnews.com/article/trump-trial-cohen-hush-money-stormy-daniels-735aadfd1ce015e05ba955c203a96f1b) Tuesday as an illegitimate “sham,” becoming the highest-ranking Republican to [*show up at court,*](https://apnews.com/article/trump-trial-cohen-hush-money-stormy-daniels-735aadfd1ce015e05ba955c203a96f1b) embrace the former president's claims of political persecution and attack the U.S. system of justice.

It was a remarkable moment in modern American ***politics***: The [*House speaker*](https://apnews.com/article/speaker-johnson-ouster-failed-marjorie-taylor-greene-11b3f1fa0c3b18a87d6ef797da739972) amplifying Trump's defense and turning the Republican Party against the federal and state legal systems that are foundational to the U.S. government and a cornerstone of democracy.

Johnson, [*who is second in line for the presidency*](https://apnews.com/article/speaker-johnson-oust-motion-to-vacate-marjorie-taylor-greene-482da113f542b62ee00b5f1692f58a5b), called the court system “corrupt.”

Outside the New York courthouse, he decried “this ridiculous prosecution that is not about justice.” He said, "It’s all about ***politics***."

The speaker is leading a growing list of Republican lawmakers who are criticizing the American judicial system as they rally to Trump’s side, appearing at the courthouse to defend the party’s presumptive presidential nominee. Trump is [*accused of having arranged secret payments to a porn actress*](https://apnews.com/article/trump-trial-hush-money-stormy-daniels-d8be160e53c8050bf788d7772f483a64) to hide negative stories during his successful 2016 campaign for president.

With Trump stuck in court and barred by a judge’s gag order from criticizing witnesses or certain elements of the case, Johnson and the lawmakers are taking it upon themselves to attack the proceedings, now in a fourth week of witness testimony. They're using the trial as a de facto [*campaign stop*](https://apnews.com/hub/election-2024) as they work to return the former president to the White House.

In portraying the case against Trump as politically motivated, the Republicans are also laying the groundwork to dismiss its significance should the jury convict, and for [*potential challenges*](https://apnews.com/hub/election-2024) to the fall election, a rematch with President Joe Biden, a Democrat.

Johnson was a chief architect of Trump’s efforts to challenge the 2020 presidential results ahead of the [*Jan. 6, 2021, mob assault*](https://apnews.com/hub/capitol-siege) on the U.S. Capitol, and last week he called the hush money trial and the other election-year cases against Trump a “borderline criminal conspiracy.”

“It is election interference,” Johnson said Tuesday, insisting he was appearing on his own to back Trump, whom he called a friend. “And the American people are not going to let this stand.”

Unlike other Republicans showing up to show their support, Johnson did not enter the courtroom where Trump is on trial, departing the scene following his remarks to reporters as he dashed back to Washington to open the House chamber for the day.

Also with Trump on Tuesday were U.S. Rep. Byron Donalds of Florida and North Dakota Gov. Doug Burgum — both considered possible vice presidential candidates — as well as former GOP candidate Vivek Ramaswamy, one of Trump’s current top surrogates.

U.S. Sens. JD Vance of Ohio and Tommy Tuberville of Alabama were among those who [*attended court on Monday*](https://apnews.com/article/donald-trump-court-allies-jd-vance-2666cc432e5291e8fa7dd7fba9c2ffad).

Trump’s campaign has [*lined up allies in recent days*](https://apnews.com/article/trump-trial-hush-money-stormy-daniels-d8be160e53c8050bf788d7772f483a64) to appear at the New York courthouse to attack witnesses and others whom Trump is barred by a judge’s gag order from criticizing himself.

Sen. Rick Scott of Florida said Monday that he appeared last week at the invitation of Trump senior advisor Susie Wiles. The campaign has said others volunteered to come to New York.

“The Democrats are using the court system to go after and prosecute, criminally, a political opponent — that's a crime,” Scott said over the weekend on Fox News. “They’re just thugs trying to stop Trump from being able to run for president.”

In the short term, the Republicans' presence at the courthouse and comments critical of the process have let Trump and his allies amplify their message without risking another explicit violation of the gag order. Trump's attorneys have challenged the gag order as unconstitutional, but an appeals court upheld it on Tuesday.

Johnson specifically attacked the credibility of Michael Cohen, Trump’s former lawyer and fixer who began his second day of testimony in the former president’s hush money trial. And others, too.

He criticized Cohen as “a man who is clearly on a mission for personal revenge," said lead prosecutor Matthew Colangelo “recently received over $10,000 in payments from the Democratic National Committee” and said the daughter of Judge Juan M. Merchan has made “millions of dollars" doing online fundraising for Democrats.

Colangelo, who joined the Manhattan District Attorney's Office in 2022 and previously worked in the U.S. Justice Department in the Biden administration, did paid “political consulting” work for the DNC in 2018, according to federal campaign finance records.

The Republican speaker, who is wholly dependent on [*support from Trump*](https://apnews.com/article/trump-speaker-johnson-maralago-congress-c6eaace204882df054795cf70a5fe60a) to keep the gavel, has aimed to strengthen their alliance, particularly as Johnson has come under fire from his own caucus in the House, including [*a failed effort at his removal*](https://apnews.com/article/speaker-johnson-oust-motion-to-vacate-marjorie-taylor-greene-482da113f542b62ee00b5f1692f58a5b) by a fellow Trump backer, U.S. Rep. Marjorie Taylor Greene of Georgia.

Johnson made an appearance with the former president at his Mar-a-Lago club last month to announce new House legislation to [*require proof of citizenship for voting*](https://apnews.com/article/trump-immigrant-voting-noncitizens-elections-explained-cf4c73b336147b5f5d9c2a22b2564994), echoing Trump's baseless claims that Democrats are abetting immigrants entering the U.S. illegally to swing elections — another potential route for Republican challenges to the 2024 election.

There [*isn’t any indication*](https://apnews.com/article/trump-immigrant-voting-noncitizens-elections-explained-cf4c73b336147b5f5d9c2a22b2564994) that noncitizens vote in significant numbers in federal elections or that they will in the future.

And Johnson joined Trump on stage for the Republican National Committee's gala at Mar-a-Lago earlier this month, praising the presumptive presidential nominee and saying House Republicans fully expect to ride Trump's coattails to their own re-elections to keep the majority hold on the chamber.

Johnson has been using the pulpit of the speaker’s office in Washington to attack the U.S. judicial system, criticizing the courts as biased against the former president, claiming the case is politically motivated by Democrats and insisting Trump has done nothing wrong.

The speaker has demurred when asked if the 2020 election was legitimate, and in a departure from the tradition of trust and adherence in U.S. election systems, Johnson and other Republicans have hedged when asked if they will accept the election results of 2024.